

# KUNIYOSHI

The Masterpieces







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March 2018

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# A Fierce and Fantastic World

While the word *ukiyo-e* often calls to mind elegant courtesans, dramatic actors, and picturesque landscapes, these celebrated works represent only one side of Edo-period innovation. Kuniyoshi (1797-1861) presents a complementary, yet counterpoint to the prints of artists such as Hokusai and Utamaro. As his fellow masters capture the physical realms of Edo's floating world, Kuniyoshi evokes a phantasmagoria of the fierce, the frightening, and the fantastic. Yet, like Hokusai and Hiroshige are to landscape, Utamaro to courtesans, Kuniyoshi belongs to the *ukiyo-e* canon, bringing Japanese myth, magic, history, and legend to life.

Welcomed by the changing tide in public taste during the 19th century, Kuniyoshi's work was nothing less than groundbreaking – in content, in format, and in sheer imaginative capacity. In terms of subject matter, Kuniyoshi ushered a niche print genre to a ravenous popularity. Though warrior prints (*musha-e*) emerged as early as 1646, few woodblock print artists designed these odes to the traditional Japanese warrior. Instead, many artists turned their attention to the dramatic iterations of heroes old and new on the kabuki stage. Kuniyoshi revitalized the warrior in print, breathing palpable drama and contemporary salience into the heroes of the past. Combining heightened bloodshed with fresh tales in imaginative visual storytellings, he brought legends to life with unprecedented dynamism, particularly

*The Head of Shuten-doji Attacking Raiko.* c. 1820. Sumi ink on paper. Ref#: JP6357





as he mastered the triptych format. Making full use of the three sheets, Kuniyoshi evoked otherworldly realms buzzing with movement and rich in detail. Though the triptychs of his contemporaries can retain some coherence if broken into their single-sheet components, Kuniyoshi's complex compositions are often indivisible. A glimpse of a single *oban* sheet sparks a startling desire to reach for the tantalizing tale unfolding beyond its margins. Yet, Kuniyoshi's ability to transform a genre and revolutionize a format stemmed from the interplay of his boundless imagination and nimble adaptability. It is these core qualities that continue to enrapture contemporary audiences.

"Masterpiece" is not a term to be used lightly. While the term speaks to the best of an artist's oeuvre, the weight of the word connotes a significance beyond the individual. It refers to a work whose impact reverberates throughout the centuries, across cultures, and throughout time. In the exhibition *Kuniyoshi: The Masterpieces*, Ronin Gallery explores Kuniyoshi's ravenous imagination and unmatched skill. The selected works remain as striking today as they were when first collected by their Edo period audience. As centuries before, these works continue to capture the curious eye and envelop the unsuspecting viewer in a realm of unparalleled imagination. This unwavering visual impact across eras and oceans establishes Kuniyoshi as not only a key artist of the ukiyo-e tradition, but also a master artist in the global scope.

## Kuniyoshi

(1797-1861)

Kuniyoshi was born to a silk dyer on the 15th day of the 11th month of 1797. His family lived in Nihonbashi, the vibrant center of Edo, Japan's capital and largest city at the time. As the son of an artisan, he grew up immersed in the unique culture of the urban merchant class. Though contemporary scholars know little about his early life, they agree that Kuniyoshi's remarkable talent became evident at an early age. At 11, Kuniyoshi's painting of Shoki the Demon Queller caught the eye of the famed ukiyo-e artist Toyokuni, head of the Utagawa school.<sup>1</sup> The image must have left a lasting impression, for he accepted Kuniyoshi as an apprentice three years later. As a member of the Utagawa school, Kuniyoshi spent the early years of his career producing actor prints (*yakusha-e*), the genre specialty of the school. Though these early works rest outside of the fierce and fantastical subjects for which Kuniyoshi is celebrated today, these prints offer insight into the development of the unique humor and restless imagination that define his later work. In addition to his tutelage with Toyokuni, Kuniyoshi may have briefly studied with Katsukawa Shuntei.

In 1814, Kuniyoshi left Toyokuni's studio to pursue a career as an independent artist—a leap of faith initially met with little success. Despite his departure from Toyokuni's workshop, Kuniyoshi continued to produce actor prints. This choice of subject matter

set him in direct competition with his former teacher. Unable to erode the Utagawa school's monopoly on *yakusha-e*, Kuniyoshi resorted to selling tatami mats to support himself. However, his fortune shifted as his focus moved from the theatrical to the heroic. As Kuniyoshi entered the field of warrior prints, he sought new inspiration, expanding the genre beyond familiar historical Japanese conflicts. He turned to Takizawa Bakin's 1805 *New Illustrated Edition of the Suikoden* (*Shinpen Suikogaden*). Translated from the 14th century Chinese classic *Stories of the Water Margin*, this tale of 108 bandit heroes resonated with Edo's merchant class. In 1827, Kuniyoshi released a short series of single-sheet prints depicting five individual rebels from the tale. Disenchanted by a corrupt samurai class and an overbearing government, viewers found relatable heroes in the *Suikoden*. From the five initial images, the series grew into a citywide craze. As Kuniyoshi's choice of subject invigorated the genre, so did its telling. He presents each hero in a solitary portrait, but imbues each image with the drama and tangible action of a larger scene. Released between c.1827 and 1830, the series incited such excitement that it quickly entered its second printing.<sup>2</sup> In fact, even his contemporaries, Kunisada and Kuniyasu, played off Kuniyoshi's popularity, producing their own interpretations of the *Suikoden* heroes.<sup>3</sup> This series reversed his fortunes, shook off the shadow of Toyokuni, and propelled Kuniyoshi to fame. From that point on, the public hungered for his portrayals of famous samurai and legendary heroes.

1. Yuriko Iwakiri, Amy Reigle Newland. *Kuniyoshi: Japanese Master of Imagined Worlds*, 9.

2. Ibid, 10.

3. Ibid, 10.



Kuniyoshi did not disappoint. He set his imagination free to challenge conventions of ukiyo-e format and subject matter. Kuniyoshi worked in all genres, producing some brilliant landscapes, charming beauties (*bijin-ga*), and lavishly printed *surimono*, but his passion lay in the heroic and legendary.<sup>4</sup> In opposition to the peaceful views of a scenic Japan provided by his contemporaries Hokusai and Hiroshige, Kuniyoshi led the rise of heroes, legends, and monsters in ukiyo-e. He embraced the triptych format, allowing his tales of the historic, comic, and fantastic to play out in palpable, panoramic action and enthralling detail. As he redefined the triptych format, he made the single sheet warrior print his own as well, enriching the image with a textual biography or summary of the event portrayed.<sup>5</sup> Kuniyoshi refreshed familiar tales with a heightened sense of fantasy, a more immersive expression of imagination.

Ever eager to explore, he experimented with Western pictorial techniques, likely gleaned from Dutch engravings. For example, he incorporated aspects of one-point perspective, chiaroscuro, and foreshortening into some of his work. Kyoshin's 19th century account *Biographies of Floating World: Artists of the Utagawa School* reveals that Kuniyoshi collected Western newspaper illustrations as well.<sup>6</sup> As he looked outside the woodblock tradition, Kuniyoshi also sought to learn from the greatest talents within his own field.

While the floating world revolved around the merchant class, outside its glow lurked a domineering government and strict class stratification. This social tension thickened as famine struck Japan in the late 1830s. The government sought to maintain order in economic chaos by cutting extravagance, a quality that had come to characterize Edo's urban culture. A series of sumptuary edicts, known as the Tenpo reforms, crashed upon the floating world between 1841 and 1843. Woodblock prints fell under government fire, both for their physical luxury and visual opulence. On a material level, images could not exceed seven or eight colors nor could they exceed three sheets of paper.<sup>7</sup> In terms of content, the reforms forbade all images of actors and courtesans. Yet, these policies underestimated the resilience of ukiyo-e and the ingenuity of Kuniyoshi.

In the wake of the Tenpo reforms, Kuniyoshi was not only undaunted, but also exhilarated. From landscape prints indulging travel aspirations to comical prints saturated in satire, Kuniyoshi continued to excel across diverse genres throughout the 1840s.<sup>8</sup> Edo-period sources praise his *kyōga*, or "crazy pictures," and as restrictions loosened in 1847, he returned to actor prints. In 1844, he began to sign his works with a red paulownia, the *yoshikiri* seal, in addition to his artist's name, or *go*.<sup>9</sup> As he deftly evaded government censorship, Kuniyoshi kept his finger to the



*Tamoto Funki Kogotozeme no Dan*. From the series *Popular Cat Games*. c.1850. JP6222

pulse of the edokko (people of Edo). From subtly veiled social commentary in the guise an epic go match (page 21) to supernatural distractions from a crumbling political reality, Kuniyoshi's prints resonated with the spirit of the floating world. As the government eased

4. Iwakiri, 12.

5. Ibid, 15.

6. Timothy Clark. *Kuniyoshi: From the Arthur R. Miller Collection*, 23.

7. Ibid, 24.

8. Ibid, 24.

9. Ibid, 27.



their restraints on the print industry in 1847, both the artists and the industry soon faced a new challenge: an encroaching world beyond Japan.

In 1853, Commodore Perry arrived in Edo Bay to establish trade relations between the United States and Japan. He left with the promise to return in a year's time. In light of China's defeat by the British in the First Opium War (1839-1842), Japan ended over two centuries of "closed-country" policy and accepted the American request. This trade deal was quickly followed by agreements with Russia, Holland, France, and Britain. Ukiyo-e artists found a fresh genre in the foreign people and items that poured into the port at Yokohama. Even as his health declined, Kuniyoshi remained at the vanguard of woodblock printmaking, producing two Yokohama prints (*Yokohama-e*). By 1856, he had developed palsy and by the spring of 1861, at the age of 64, he died from complications of a stroke.

Kuniyoshi left no written records of his own. Contemporary scholars have sought his presence in the records of others – a 19th century anecdote reveals that he wore a colorful firefighter's coat, while another suggest that the artist bore the nickname "Scarlet Skin," rumoring a tattoo that stretched across the artist's shoulders and back. An 1853 police record places Kuniyoshi at a summer *shogakai*, or calligraphy and painting party. Among

the prominent poets and artists of Edo, the undercover officer recounts how Kuniyoshi shed his kimono, dousing it with a rich, black *sumi* ink. Like an oversized calligraphy brush, the artist used the garment to paint the familiar form of the *Suikoden* hero Kyumonryu across the enormous paper laid at his feet.<sup>10</sup>

Though Kuniyoshi's self-portraits deny the viewer a glimpse of the artist's face, the sense of Kuniyoshi's character is clear. It courses through his prints and echoes in the work of his students past and present. He was a true *edokko*, or "child of Edo," captivated by the realm of imagination and dedicated to constant innovation. Working in an age of uncertainty, Kuniyoshi bravely welcomed change not as an impediment, but as an opportunity to develop his art. This creative adaptability lends a versatility to his work, imbuing his designs with enduring relevance, whether they face an Edo period or contemporary audience.



Yoshiiku. *Memorial Portrait of Kuniyoshi*. 1861. Ref#: JPR-87615

#### Note from the President

*Kuniyoshi: The Masterpieces* presents many of Kuniyoshi's great works. Though his genre-crossing oeuvre far surpasses the boundaries of a single show, Ronin Gallery is thrilled to present this curated selection of masterpiece prints. For additional information (i.e. signature, publisher, provenance, condition, etc) about the prints in this exhibition or other works by Kuniyoshi, please check our website or contact us directly. This exhibition would not have been possible without the dedication of the Ronin staff who are always there when we need them. A warm thank you to Tomomi Seki for her invaluable translations and expertise, to Madison Folks for her eloquent writing and diligent research, to Sayaka Ueno for her photography, and to Travis Suzaka for his fine design skills. A special warm appreciation to my executive director, Roni Neuer, who curated and organized the exhibition.

David T. Libertson

10. Iwakiri, 11.

## Masterpiece Triptychs





*Minamoto no Tametomo Rescued by Tengu.* c.1849. Ref#: JPR-85206

In one of his most iconic triptychs, Kuniyoshi draws from Bakin's novel *Chinsetsu Yumiharizuki* to depict Minamoto no Tametomo's supernatural rescue from a storm. Defeated in 1156 during the Hogen rebellion, Tametomo was exiled to Izu. He soon escaped to Kyushu where he plotted the defeat of the Taira clan. As he sets sail to Kyoto to carry out his plan, a wild storm threatens his boat. In this fantastic print, Kuniyoshi conflates the three moments that lead to Tametomo's dramatic rescue. To the far right,

Tametomo's wife drowns herself to quell the storm. After her sacrifice, Emperor Sutoku summons the tengu that descend from the left edge of the triptych to save Tametomo and their only son, Sutemaru. The infant is protected in the arms of Tametomo's faithful retainer Kiheiiji, who rides on the back of a crocodile-shark (wanizame).





*Tametomo Encounters the Storm in Higo Province. c.1836. Ref#: JPR-85150*

This print unites Kuniyoshi's favorite themes: the strength of the hero, the forces of nature, and the power of the supernatural. As Tametomo sails from Kyushu to Kyoto to seek revenge on the Taira clan, a dragon rouses a terrible storm. Similar to the 1849 print on page 11, Tametomo's wife throws herself into the sea, as the tengu fly in from the top right corner. In the bottom left of the triptych, Tametomo's son and loyal retainer find salvation on the back

crocodile-shark. In this interpretation, Kuniyoshi conveys the power of the storm through the battered boat and the fear of its victims through the samurai who struggle to stay above the waves.





*Miyamoto Musashi and the Whale Off the Coast of Hizen. c.1848. Ref#: JPR-87488*

In this exceptionally rare and iconic triptych, Kuniyoshi asserts the richness of his imagination. At the center of the middle sheet, the celebrated sword master Miyamoto Musashi (1583-1647) thrusts his sword into a large whale off the coast of Hizen province. As the whale's body fills the composition both vertically and horizontally, this print exemplifies Kuniyoshi's embrace of the triptych space. The churning of the surrounding wave and white-speckled

body of the northern pacific right whale (semi-kujira) create a striking sense of motion. Despite the large format, detail is not overlooked. Kuniyoshi achieves the uneven shading on the whale's back through itabokashi, a technique achieved through abrasion of the woodblock. With its bold use of the triptych format, this design remains as striking today as it was 170 years ago.





*Taira Ghosts Attacking Yoshitsune in Daimotsu Bay. c.1849. Ref#: JP2609*

Through this chilling triptych, Kuniyoshi presents an episode from the quasi-historical *Tale of Heike*. Soon after the leaders of the Taira clan sank to a watery grave and the Minamoto clan claimed power in Japan, Yoshitsune of the Minamoto clan was forced to flee the wrath of his jealous brother, Yoritomo. As Yoshitsune's fleet crossed Daimotsu Bay, they found themselves caught in a violent storm. A great wave swelled under the boat, threatening to overtake them, and the vengeful Taira ghosts emerged from the clouds. Kuniyoshi captures the

pinnacle of dread in this legend. While Musashibo Benkei has assumed his position at the rear of the ship, he has yet to dispel the frightening specters and calm the sea with his prayers. Here, salvation seems unlikely: jagged tendrils of surf crash upon the boat as its occupants frantically grasp the sail. Rising above the horizon, the ghosts of the Taira tower menacingly over the scene. The horns of the ghosts, the white lines on the waves, and the use of mica in the water indicate that this is an early edition of this exquisite design.



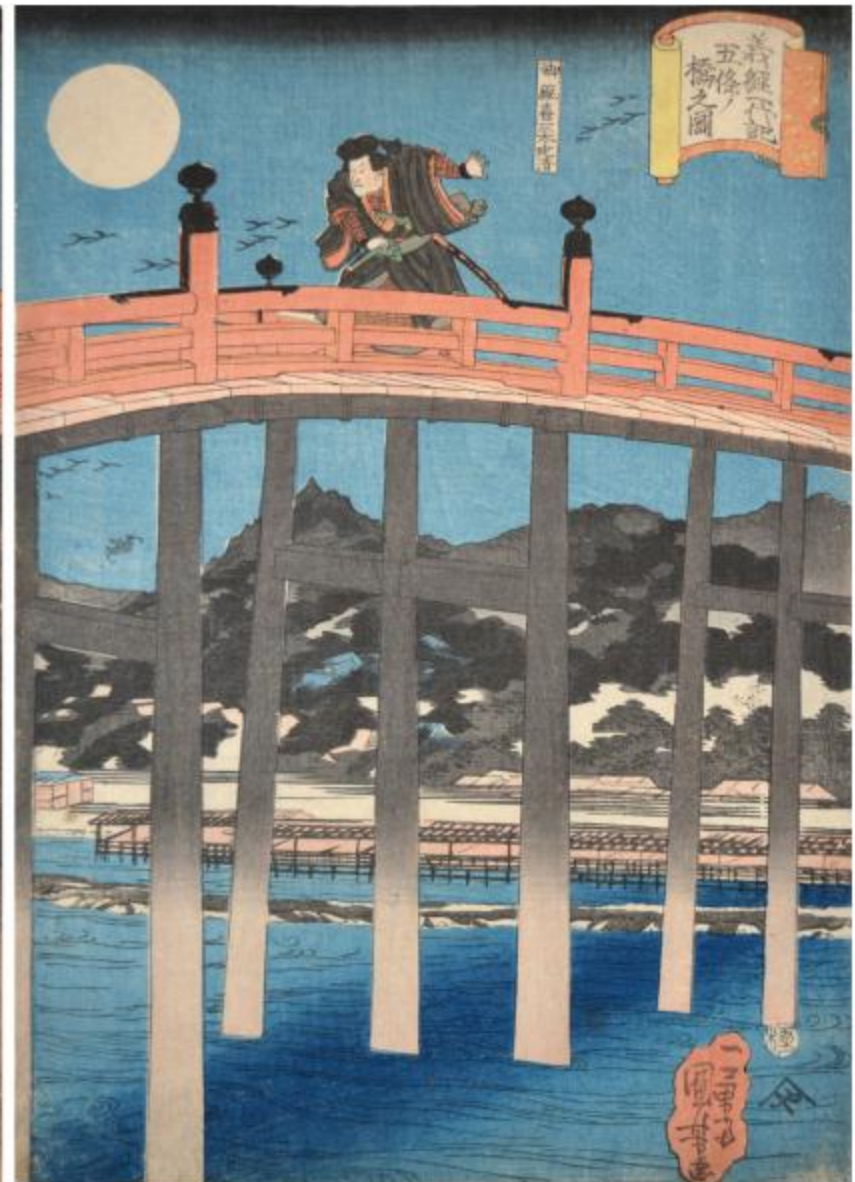
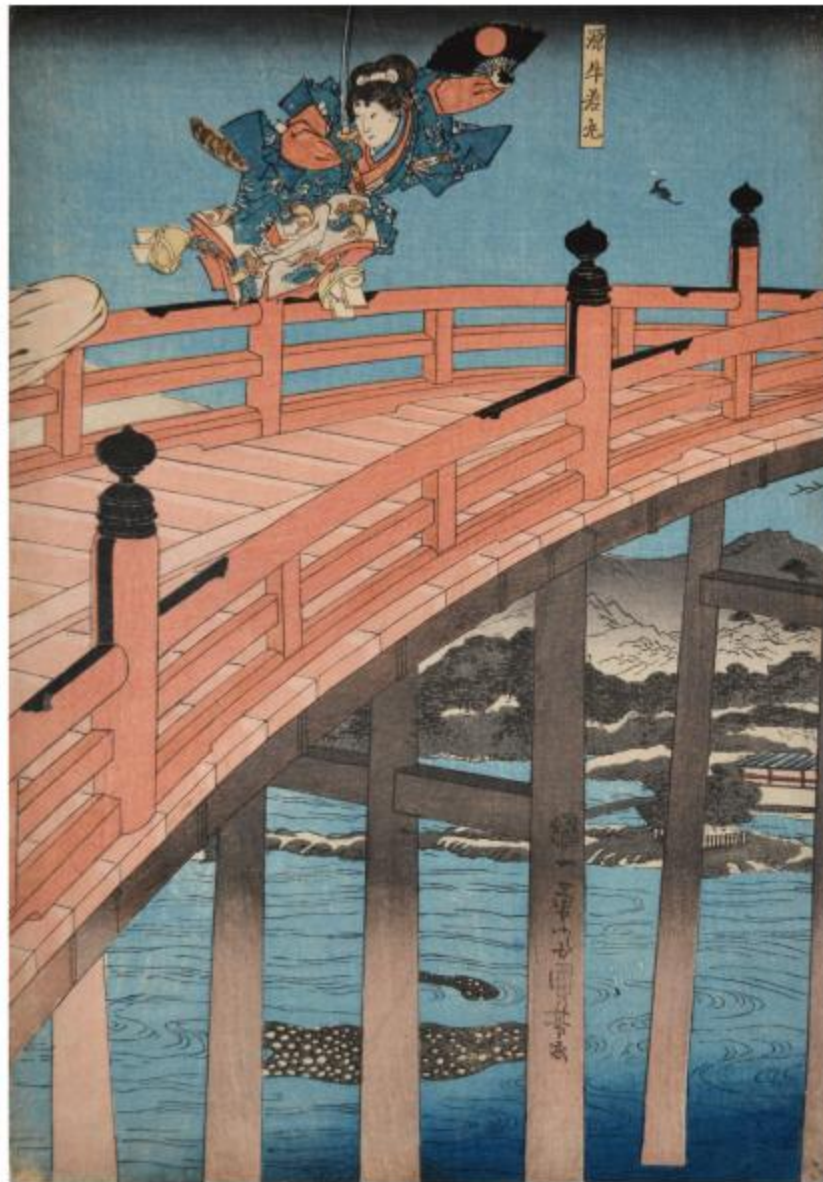


*The Ghost of Akugenta Yoshihira Revenge of Namba Jiro at Nunobiki Waterfall. c.1825. Ref#: JPr-63504*

Dating to c.1825, this design marks one of Kuniyoshi's earliest explorations of the triptych format. As the Nunobiki Waterfall flows blue and white in the left panel, Kuniyoshi juxtaposes natural beauty with supernatural drama in this episode from the *Tale of Heiji*. In the center sheet, Akugenta Yoshihira (1140-1160) floats upon a burst of fire. He has returned to avenge his death at the hands of Namba Jiro years earlier. As promised at his death, Yoshihira has

returned with the power of lightning to carry out his revenge. Kuniyoshi captures the intensity of Yoshihira's fury through the bolts that frantically branch through the composition, blowing back the trees, and destroying the ground on impact. As the doomed Namba Jiro is thrown into the air, a fireball speeds towards his upturned chest, the all-powerful Kiyomori and his retainers watch from the edges of the print.





*Ushiwaka-maru and Benkei on Gojo Bridge. From the series Life of Yoshitsune. c.1840. Ref#: JPR1-37144*

Kuniyoshi uses the arch of Gojo Bridge to draw the viewer into the famous first meeting of Benkei and Ushiwakamaru. The story tells that Benkei, a wandering priest feared for his strength and swordsmanship, waited in the shadow of Gojo Bridge to challenge unsuspecting travelers. One night, Ushiwakamaru (Yoshitsune) attempted to cross the bridge. Though Benkei expected a quick victory, Ushiwakamaru easily bested the towering priest. Following this moonlit duel, Benkei became one of

Ushiwakamaru's most loyal followers. Though this legendary battle is the subject of the print, Kuniyoshi grounds the tale with a sense of place. The heroes occupy only a small amount of the composition, but Kuniyoshi pays special attention to the bridge. Through attention to scale, the arc, and the landscape under the bridge, Kuniyoshi places the viewer on the bank of the river, gazing up at the historical event overhead.





*Takiyasha and Skeleton Specter in the Ruined Palace at Soma. c.1844. Ref#: JPR-85133*

Epitomizing the fantastic quality that has come to define Kuniyoshi's work, this print is one of the most iconic ukiyo-e designs and perhaps Kuniyoshi's best-known work. Following Taira no Masakado's failed attempt to seize control of Kyoto, his daughter Takiyasha remained in the dilapidated Soma palace in Shimosa province (Chiba). Alone among the ruins, she became an accomplished sorceress. When the hero Mitsukuni is sent to destroy Takiyasha, it is he that meets his end. In Kuniyoshi's interpretation of

this tale, Takiyasha stands beneath the broken lattice, summoning the massive skeleton specter from the darkness. Leaning over two sheets, the specter curls its claw-like fingers around the blinds, lowering its hollow face towards the ill-fated intruders. It is possible that Kuniyoshi drew inspiration for this strikingly large skeleton from anatomical models in Dutch drawing manuals.





*The Earth Spider Conjures Goblins at the Mansion of Minamoto no Yorimitsu (Raiko). c.1842. Ref#: JP-88244*

Renowned for his unearthly power, Raiko, also known as Minamoto no Yorimitsu, is among Japan's most popular warriors. In this haunting design, Kuniyoshi bisects the composition along a sweeping diagonal, delineating the realm of demons and that of the mortals ensnared in the Earth Spider's web. In the top right corner, Raiko is lost in a deep sleep. He dreams of the Earth Spider, who looms over the hero as demons wage a battle in the darkness. In the foreground, two of Raiko's followers, Watanabe no Tsuna and Sakata no Kintoki, play a game of

go, yet neither seem to realize the battle blazing just beyond the lamplight. To the far left, Usui no Tadamitsu looks over his shoulder, while to the far right, Urabe no Suetake looks into the darkness, perhaps sensing the menacing realm just out of sight. As the crest depicted on Suetake's kimono matched that of the Mizuno Tadakuni, author of the Tenpo reforms, this work functioned as a riddle-picture to its edokko audience. The rumors of its political subtext propelled the print to extreme popularity, and ultimately, a government ban.





*The Earth Spider Conjures Goblins at the Mansion of Minamoto no Yorimitsu (Raiko)*. c.1843. Ink and color on paper. Ref#: JP-88250

Though Kuniyoshi's sensational Earth Spider triptych faced government censorship in 1843, the popularity of the design sparked numerous pirated copies. The original publisher feared government crackdown and pulled all blocks and prints from production and sale, but Kuniyoshi and his students secretly circulated paintings of the design. This is one of those rare illicit ink and color paintings. Its existence speaks to the resonance of this design with

national sentiment of the time. In an era of famine, striking class stratification, and unjust government edicts, this design allowed its viewers to vent their frustrations, to identify the demons of the day with the monsters of Kuniyoshi's vivid imagination.





*Recovering the Jewel from the Dragon Palace. 1853. Ref#: JPR-85195*

In a stampede of weapon-wielding sea creatures, Kuniyoshi captures the popular story of Princess Tamamori and the sacred jewel. The Tang emperor presented a sacred jewel as a gift to his father-in-law, Fujiwara no Kamatari (614-669). As the jewel crossed the sea to Japan, a powerful storm wrecked the ship and the jewel sank to the Dragon Palace in the depths below. In the hope of retrieving the lost jewel, Kamatari's son Fuhito marries the young ama (female pearl diver) Tamamo, who dives into the sea

to retrieve the precious jewel. As the Dragon King's court chases the diver, she cuts open her breast to hide the jewel. Though she saves the jewel, she dies from her wounds when she returns to shore. Kuniyoshi portrays the story of Tamamo, or Princess Tamamori, with strength and determination, jewel in hand as she nears the far left edge of the print. As she glances behind her, knife raised, all manner of sea creatures pursue her, their king furiously stirring the sea overhead.





*Earth Spider's Goblins Barge into Raiko's Retainers' Game of Go. 1861. Ref#: JPr-63546*

In one of his last triptychs, Kuniyoshi returns to the legend of Raiko and the Earth Spider. While his c.1842 triptych presents a veritable army of diverse demons (page 18 and 19), here Kuniyoshi turns his focus to Raiko's retainers. Immersed in a game of go, these legendary samurai fend off the demons that encroach from the darkness – pulling back the lip of terrifying waitress or restraining a ghastly head on an endless neck. Throughout his life,

Kuniyoshi designed fantastic creatures and specters of astounding size, but in this work, the human heroes become larger than life. This scale invites an appreciation of detail, such as the retainers' eyelashes or the tactility of the cord wrapped around their hair. The open corner at the go table invites the viewer to place themselves within the ghoulish scene.





*Last Stand of Kusunoki Tatewaki Masatsura at Shijo Nawate Battle. c.1850. Ref#: JP-87253*

Kuniyoshi captures the final stand of the Kusunoki heroes with a fierce and gruesome impact in this scene that certainly feels like a nightmare. Drawn from the *Taiheiki* (Chronicle of the Great Peace), the 1348 battle at Shijo Nawate marked the last attempt of the Southern Court to overthrow the Northern court. Though wildly outnumbered, the Southern warriors fought to the bitter end. Kuniyoshi focuses on three brothers of the Kusunoki clan: Wada Genshu takes the lead, followed by his younger brother Wada Shinbei Masatomo, and finally, their

leader Kusunoki Masatsura. As the leader of the Southern forces leans against a slain horse and uses a human body for cover, the horror of the battle becomes palpable. Blue creeps across the heroes faces, evoking the ghosts that stalk the legends of ukiyo-e. While Kuniyoshi focuses on the doomed struggle of the heroes in the foreground, the crumpled pair of fallen soldiers in the middle of the left sheet lends a depth to the otherwise tonal background.





*Last Stand of Kusunoki Clan at Shijo Nawate. 1857. Ref#: JPR-77548*

Released in 1857, this triptych returns to the demise of the Kusunoki clan at Shijo Nawate. Presenting this 1348 battle from the from the epic *Taiheiki*, this print shows the warriors of the Southern Court just before their gruesome defeat by their Northern enemy. While the rain of arrows remains as incessant as that found in Kuniyoshi's c.1850 rendition of the incident (pg. 22), the Kusunoki heroes retain more vigor in

this later triptych. Arrows lodge in the bodies of the warriors and their tattered banners, but their faces reveal their fierceness. Though bloodstains bloom on their armor, the vitality of their postures suggests that not is lost - yet.



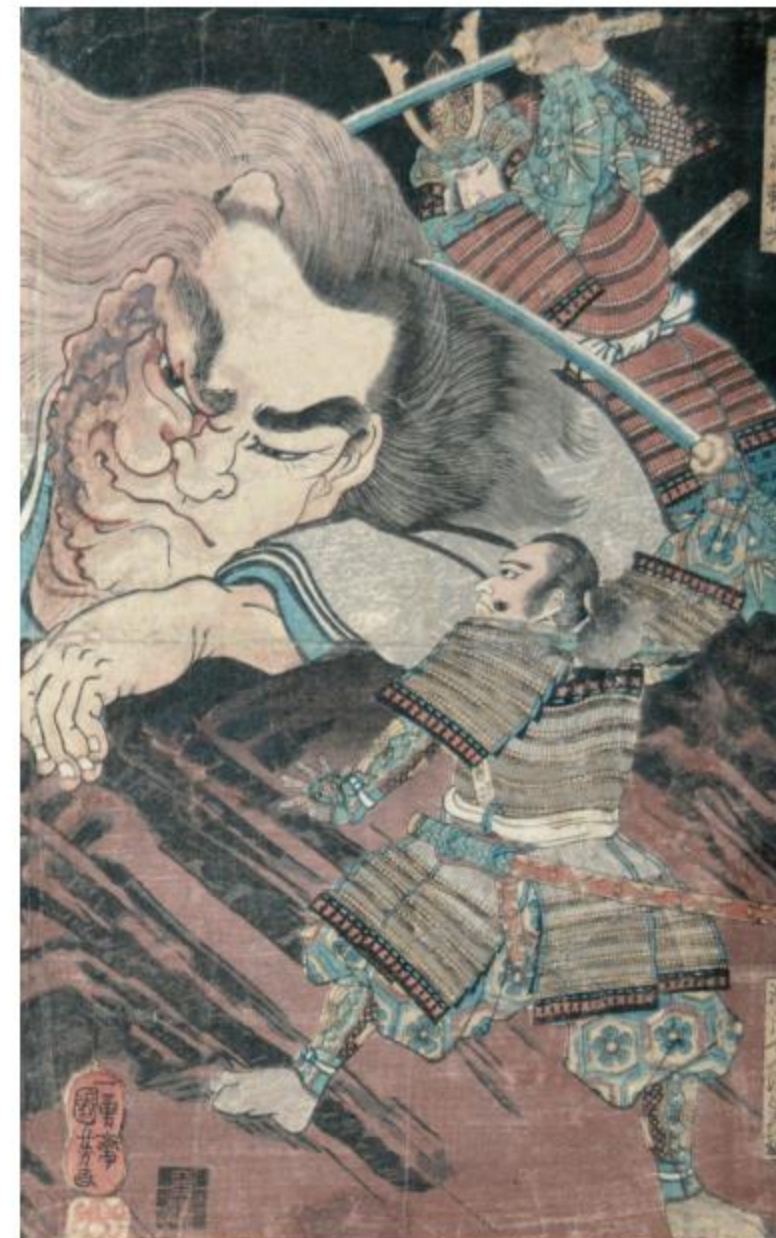


*Asahina Saburo Yoshibide Wrestling with Two Crocodile Sharks at Kotsubo Beach, Kamakura. 1849. Ref#: JP-89474*

Asahina Saburo is a legendary hero known for his immense strength and spectacular swimming ability. In this print, Kuniyoshi captures one of Asahina's most famous exploits. At the turn of the 13th century, the shogun Minamoto no Yoriie took a tour of the seaside of Kotsubo, where he encountered Asahina. Aware of Asahina's remarkable abilities, Minamoto no Yoriie requested that the hero show off his swimming ability. Though the hero impressed onlookers with his speed and endurance, he wowed

the crowd as he wrestled with crocodile sharks amidst the waves. Asahina pulls the crocodile sharks from the water, prying open its powerful jaws with his bare hands. As the second crocodile shark lurches towards the hero, Kuniyoshi juxtaposes the white-capped surf in the foreground with a placid distant landscape.





*Minamoto no Yorimitsu (Raiko) Attacking Shuten-doji . c.1848. Ref#: JPR-85521*

In a powerful composition, Kuniyoshi illustrates a famous exploit of Raiko (aka Minamoto no Yorimitsu), a legendary warrior credited with slaying demons, ogres and goblins that roamed medieval Japan. In this particular story, a giant demon known as the Shuten-doji was kidnapping the daughters of noble families, taking them to his lair on Mt. Oe, and eating them. Raiko was sent to kill Shuten-doji. Accompanied by his four loyal retainers, Raiko begins his ascent up the mountain, where he is met

by three old deities. The trio give the heroes a special sake that is harmful to demons but beneficial to humans. On Mt. Oe, Raiko tricks Shuten-doji into drinking the sake, immobilizing him so that Raiko can remove the demon's head. Here, the immense demon stretches across three sheets, rendering Raiko and his retainers small, although mighty. As the warriors ready their swords, Shuten-doji reverts from its daytime guise as a man to its true demonic appearance.





*The Battle at Uji River. c.1850. Ref#: JPI-73711*

In an epic scene from the Genpei War, three Minamoto generals, Kajiwaru Kagesue (left) Sasaki Takatsuna (center) and Hatakeyama Shigetada (right) cross the Uji River to challenge the forces of Minamoto no Yoshinaka. In 1184, Minamoto no Yoshinaka attempted to seize control of the Minamoto clan from his cousins Yoshitsune and Yoritomo. Though Yoshinaka destroyed the bridge over Uji River, an unfazed Yoshitsune leads his

generals through the river on horseback to meet the battle on the far bank. Beneath fluttering standards, three horses raise their heads above the waves. The dark water churns around each horse and man. Though this watery trudge evokes a sense of quiet, the arrow that flies towards Sasaki Takatsuna suggests the chaos of the battle that awaits them on the far bank.





*Tales of the Three Kingdoms: Gentoku.* 1853. Ref#: JPr-73724

Written by Luo Guanzhong in the 14th century, the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is a Chinese historical novel that chronicles the power struggle between the kingdoms of the Wei, the Wu, and the Han between 184 and 280 CE. Kuniyoshi draws inspiration from this epic military tale. Centered in the composition, Gentoku of the kingdom of Han and his black horse Tekiro wade across Tan Gorge to flee an assassination attempt. In *Three Kingdoms*, Gentoku is

a benevolent leader, an honorable hero guided by a code of loyalty and compassion – values that aligned with the samurai code of bushido.



# Oban and Diptychs





*Kaosho Rochishin. From the series The 108 Heroes of the Popular Suikoden. c.1828. Ref#: JPR-86795*

As a tale of 108 bandit warriors, the Suikoden stressed camaraderie and loyalty, often to violent ends. Rochishin, a military captain turned Buddhist priest, came to epitomize justice, loyalty, brashness, and physical strength. Tattooed outlines of flowers bloom across Rochishin's shoulders as he demonstrates his immense strength: prayer beads clutched in hand, the "flowery monk" smashes a tree in two.



*Tanmei Jiro Gen Shogo. From the series The 108 Heroes of the Popular Suikoden. c.1828. Ref#: JPR-84929*

Kuniyoshi captures the tale of the Gen brothers through Gen Shogo's underwater battle. As the pair plummet to the depths of the bay, fish flee left and right. Like many heroes of the Suikoden, Gen Shogo is heavily tattooed – a leopard prowls across his shoulders and botanical sleeves creep down his arms. With its tangible sense of movement and high drama, this is an outstanding design.





*Konkoryu Rishun*. From the series *The 108 Heroes of the Popular Suikoden*. c.1828. Ref#: JPR-84945

Konkoryu Rishun, known as the “Water Dragon,” is renowned for his incredible swimming ability. As Rishun bursts out of the water, the thunder god Raijin glares out at the viewer from the large tattoo on the hero’s chest. Arms bent overhead, Rishun overturns the boat with ease and reduces his enemy to a glimpse of flailing limbs.



*Kokusenpu Riki*. From the series *The 108 Heroes of the Popular Suikoden*. c.1828. Ref#: JPR5031

Kokusenpu Riki, aka “Black Whirlwind” or “Iron Ox,” is favorite hero of the Suikoden. His nicknames stemmed from his physical strength, deep complexion, and wild fighting style. In this print, he wields his signature ax overhead, poised to strike. Known for a fiery temper and an insatiable gambling habit, Kokusenpu Riki embodies the outlaw nature of the Suikoden tales.





*Rori Hakucho Chojun. From the series The 108 Heroes of the Popular Suikoden. c.1828. Ref#: JPR-84918*

In this masterwork, Chojun breaks through the Yongjin water gate under a rain of enemy arrows. While the hero perished from his wounds soon after this triumph, Kuniyoshi portrays the popular warrior as a picture of strength—the black bars of the gate play around his form and the arrows just miss their target.



*Sekihakki Ryuto. From the series The 108 Heroes of the Popular Suikoden. c.1828. Ref#: JPR5007*

Sekihakki Ryuto raises his sword overhead, preparing to battle an unseen opponent. With a red birthmark on his face and bright red hair, Ryuto earned the nickname “The Red Devil.” Like many of the Suikoden heroes, he possessed incredible strength, but he specialized in combat with a pudao, a long-handled Chinese weapon topped with a blade.





Nyuunryu Kosonsoho. From the series *The 108 Heroes of the Popular Suikoden*. c. 1828. Ref#: JPR-86798

Nyuunryu Kosonsoho was a Taoist priest famed for his ability to control wind and rain. Nicknamed “Dragon in the Clouds,” he was extraordinarily tall and elegant. His robes whip in the wind as he summons the stormy clouds that gather in the sky. While Kuniyoshi presents the hero’s abilities, he also nods to the hero’s nickname through the dragon that wraps around Kosonsoho’s form.



Otani Furuinosuke. From the series *Eight Hundred Heroes of Our Country’s Suikoden*. c. 1828. Ref#: JPR-84936

In the series *Eight Hundred Heroes of Our Country’s Suikoden*, Kuniyoshi presents legendary Japanese heroes in the individual portrait style of the Chinese *Suikoden* characters. Here, Kuniyoshi presents Otani Furuinosuke. Legend holds that Furuinosuke killed a giant wild boar with his bare hands at age 15.





*Sakata Kaido-maru Wrestling the Giant Carp.* c.1836. Ref#: JP5574

Sakata Kaido-maru (Kintaro), the Japanese folk hero known for his supernatural strength, wrestles an enormous carp under a pounding waterfall. Despite the carp's desperate attempts to escape, Kaido-maru's strong arms are confidently wrapped around the struggling fish. Raised by the mountain witch, Kaido-maru befriended the animals on the mountain and wrestled them for sport. He is a symbol of strength and perseverance.



*Lobster and Phoenix.* From the series *Birds and Beast.* c.1837. Ref#: JP5572

A giant lobster rises above the wild and energetic sea, startling the phoenix that has landed on its stiff antenna. Based on a Zen parable, the phoenix has mistaken the lobster for a branch, just as humans fail to understand the metaphysical realm. Kuniyoshi combines rounded waves with angular white crests to stir a vivid background for the case of mistaken identity at play above the waves.





Warabi: Inuyama Dosetsu. From the series *The 69 Stations of the Kisokaido*. 1852. Ref#: JPR-84862

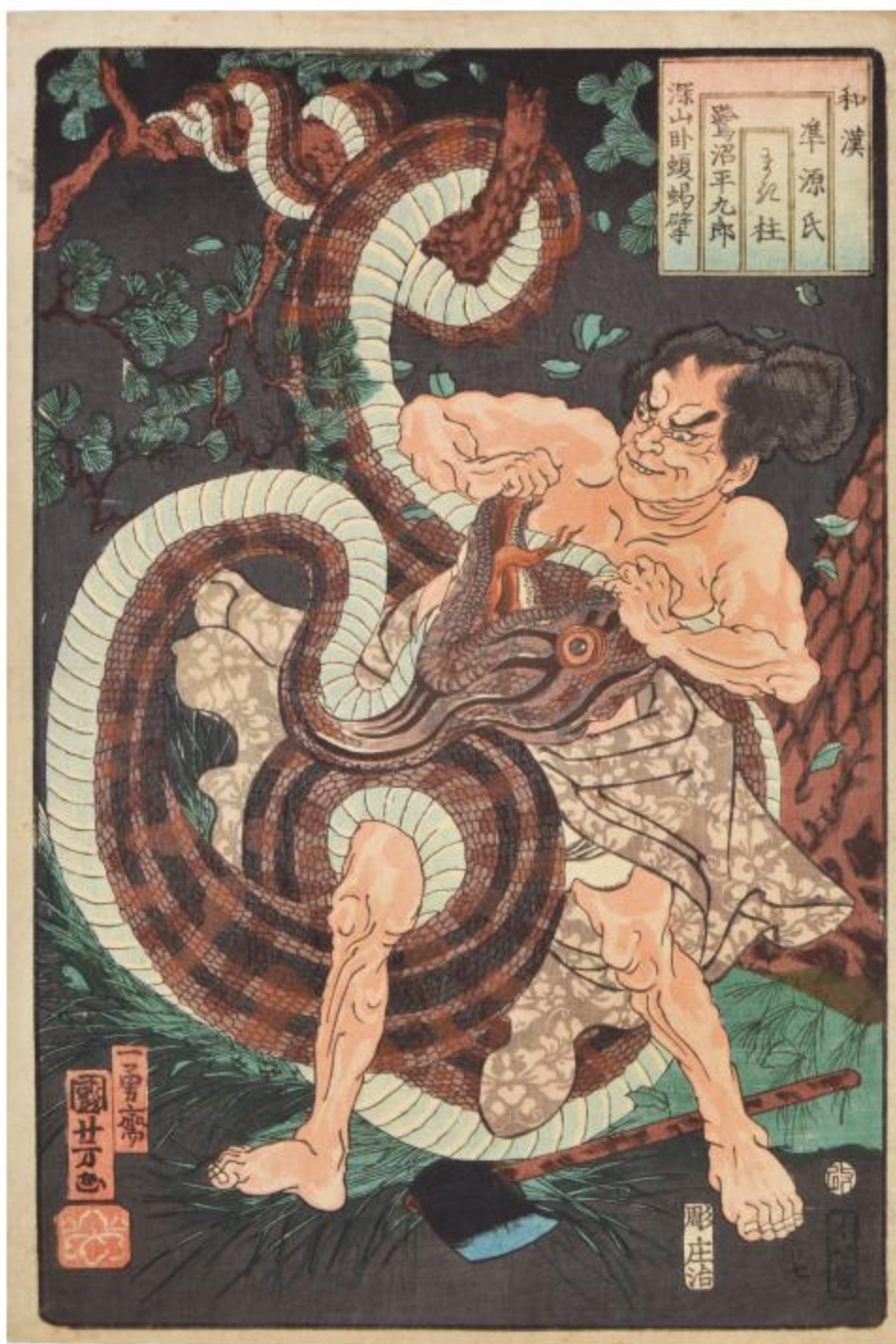
In this mystical design, Kuniyoshi portrays the hero Inuyama Dosetsu. Dressed as a wandering priest, Dosetsu makes “magic” as he sits unscathed in the middle of a raging fire. With its furling flames and fluttering fabric, this design is one of the most dramatic prints of the Kisokaido series.



Musa: Miyamoto Musashi. From the series *The 69 Stations of the Kisokaido*. 1852. Ref#: JPR-87607

Miyamoto Musashi was a renowned swordsman and a favorite subject of Kuniyoshi. Musashi can be found battling a variety of incredible creatures such as tengu, monstrous fishes, and mythical beings throughout Japanese legends. Here, Kuniyoshi captures the warrior suspended above a mountain ravine, mid-battle with a giant bat.





*Saginoike Heikuro Fighting a Giant Python.* From the series *Japanese and Chinese Comparisons for the Tale of Genji*. 1855. Ref#: JP5983

As the hero Saginoike Heikuro battles a giant serpent, he forgoes the ax at his feet and pries open the snake's mouth with his bare hands. Kuniyoshi captures the determination of the warrior—his eyebrows pull together and he bites his lower lip—and the surprise of the serpent—its eyes open wide as its forked tongue flails in panic.



*Saito Toshimoto Nyudo Ryubon.* From the series *Heroes of the Taibei Era*. c.1848. Ref#: JPt-17177

In this scene from the first Korean invasion of the 16th century, Saito Toshimoto struggles in an underwater battle. A devoted follower of Kiyomasa and a strong, capable warrior, Toshimoto challenged this “Korean giant” on the battlefield and the pair fell into the water. As they sank past the fleeing fish, Toshimoto decapitated his formidable opponent.





*Tenjiku Tokubei*. c.1828. Ref#: JPR-84973

Tenjiku Tokubei (1612 – 1692) was a historical adventurer who traveled to China, Siam, and India. In the 19th century, he became a favorite kabuki character. He was reimagined as a robber and a powerful magician who controlled a giant, fire-breathing toad-depicted here with bulging eyes and elaborate pattering. The mica on the frog's chest reveals that this is an early state of this design.



*Akugenta Striking Down Nanba at Nunobiki Waterfall*. c.1834. Ref#: JPR-87594

Akugenta Yoshihira's revenge on Nanba Tsunefusa at Nunobiki Waterfall was a favorite subject of Kuniyoshi. Here, he presents Akugenta avenging his death in a violent rain of lightning. Bold against the black background. Akugenta lights up the scene with the fire of his wrath.





*Hatsuhana, Penance under the Waterfall. From the series Stories of Wise and Virtuous Women. c.1842. Ref#: JPR-84952*

Beneath the unrelenting flow of the waterfall, Hatsuhana, the wife of the warrior Iinuma Katsugoro, prays for her husband's recovery for one hundred days. When she is murdered by her husband's enemy, her prayers are granted and Katsugoro avenges her death. Though her pale toes curl on a rocky seat and snowy trees evoke the frigid temperature of the water, her devotion does not waver.



*Minamoto no Shigeyuki. From the series 100 Poems by 100 Poets. 1855. Ref#: JP5569*

Small and bright against the waves, Minamoto no Shigeyuki stands on a rocky outcrop, gazing out at the white-capped waves crashing against the shore below. Mt. Fuji rises tall and unshakeable from the horizon, framed between the power of the sea and the humble poet.





Story of The Eight Dogs by Old Kyokutei. c.1835. Ref#: JPR-87356

Based on the popular novel *Nanso Satomi Hakkenden* (Nanso Satomi and Eight Dog Warriors) by Takizawa Bakin, referred to here as “Old Kyokutei”, this print presents a climactic battle at Koga Castle. Birds flee from their roost as Inukai Genpachi Nobumichi (left) battles Inuzuka Shino Moritaka (right) on the



roof Horyukaku Tower. As Inukai’s men rush towards Inuzuka, the hero reaches for his sword, breaking the divide between pictorial space and the textual story printed just above his head.





*Musashibo Benkei and Minamoto no Ushiwakamaru on Gojo Bridge. c.1845. Ref#: JPR-87605*

Printed roughly five years after the sprawling triptych *Gojo Bridge* (p.16), this design returns to the fateful meeting of Minamoto no Yoshitsune (here referred to as Minamoto no Ushiwakamaru) and Musashibo Benkei. The pair battle at the edge of Kyoto's Gojo Bridge, making contact right along

the centerline of the diptych. As Benkei attempts to win his thousandth sword from an unsuspecting traveler, he is bested by the young Yoshitsune and soon becomes Yoshitsune's most loyal follower.



## The Biographies of the Loyal Retainers (The Forty-Seven Ronin)

50 oban prints in an album format. c.1847.

Ref#: JPr-23706

Based on true events from the turn of the 18th century, the story of the forty-seven Ronin has sparked prints, plays, books and even contemporary film. The story goes as follows:

The Shogun appointed Asano, a young lord from the country, to receive the Emperor's ambassadors. The unscrupulous Kira Yoshinaka was assigned to teach Asano the ways of court etiquette, but insulted Asano so deeply that country lord drew his sword in the palace. This offense mandated ritual suicide. Asano's forty-seven samurai retainers swore to avenge their masters death. After much planning, they staged a night attack, killing Kira before turning themselves in and meeting their own death. Their revenge marks an exemplary stand for the samurai code of bushido - a code of loyalty and honor. To this day, the forty-seven ronin remain enshrined at Sengaku Temple beside their beloved master.

Six prints from the album illustrated on following page.







Six prints from the complete album *The Biographies of the Loyal Retainers*. Ref#: JPr-23706



## Drawings and Keyblocks



*Wrestle.* c.1855. Sumi ink on paper. Ref#: JPR1-73398



*Satsuma-no-kami Tadanori and Okabe Rokuyata Tadazumi.* From the series *Tussles of Heroes*. 1856. Sumi ink on paper. Ref#: JPR1-73400





Goromaru Shigemune and Soga Goro Tokimune. From the series *Mirror of Fierce Warriors*. c.1830. Keyblock print. Ref#: JP6465



Sakata Kintoki at Mt. Ashigara. From the series *Mirror of Fierce Warriors*. c.1830. Keyblock print. Ref#: JP6464



## Other Notable Works





*Minamoto no Tametomo. c.1850. Ref#: JP5539*



*Koman Swimming across Lake Biwa with Genji Banner while Attacked by Sanemori (Taira Clan). From the series Mitate Selected Eight Views. c.1846. Ref#: JPR-85075*



*Night Attack of Horikawa Mansion. 1852. Ref#: JP1497*



*Autumn Moon at Kanzaki: Higuchi Jiro Kanemitsu Hurling an Anchor. From the series Mitate Selected Eight Views. c.1846. Ref#: JPR-85523*





*The Ghost of Okiku. From the series Scenes from Kabuki Plays. c.1850. Ref#: JPR-85104*



*Takeda Shingen Destroys Suwa Yorishige in Battle. c.1850. Ref#: JP2105*



*Wind. From the series Jisei Kachofugetsu: The Beauties of Nature. c.1846. Ref#: JPR1-63826*



*Soga Brothers Avenge Their Father. From the series Mitate Selected Eight Views. c.1851. Ref#: JP-78740*





*Incomparable Hidari Jingoro (Master Sculptor). c.1848. Ref#: JPR-87609*



*Scene from Yoritomo's Hunting Party: Nitta Sbiro Tadatsune Killing a Wild Boar. c.1842. Ref#: JP1499*



*Miyamoto Musashi Knocking Down Shirakura Dengoemon and His Men with Broken Beam. From the series Mitate Selected Eight Views. c.1846. Ref#: JPR-85112*



*Kenshin Leading Furious Charge into Takeda Troops at the Great Battle of Kawanakajima. c.1852. Ref#: JP1504*





*The Great Battle of Ichi-no-Tani. 1851. Ref#: JP1506*



*Battle of Rokubara. c.1850. Ref#: JP1511*



*Tomoe Gozen at Awazugahara Battle. c.1848. Ref#: JP1512*



*Asahina Fighting Two Crocodile Sharks. c.1842. Ref#: JPR5045*





*Chinese Heroes Pledge Brotherhood in Peach Garden. From the series Romance of the Three Kingdoms. 1853. Ref#: JPR-78832*



*Told Story of the Loyal Retainers (47 Ronin). c.1852. Ref#: JPR-87385*



*In 1153 at Konoe's Palace, Skilled Archer Yorimasa Shooting the Nue. c.1842. Ref#: JP1503*



*The Great Battle of Kawanakajima. 1854. Ref#: JPR1-75029*





(Left) *Itabashi: Inuzuka Shino*. From the series *The 69 Stations of the Kisokaido*. 1852. Ref#: JPR-64120



(Center) *Kumagaya: Kojiro Naoie Armored and Mounted*. From the series *The 69 Stations of the Kisokaido*. 1852. Ref#: JPR-67384



(Right) *Oiwake: Oiwa and Takuetsu*. From the series *The 69 Stations of the Kisokaido*. 1852. Ref#: JPR-87288



(Left) *Ashida: Araimaru and Jogetsuni*. From the series *The 69 Stations of the Kisokaido*. 1852. Ref#: JPR-87290



(Center) *Sekigabara: Sumo Wrestlers Hanaregoma Chokichi and Nuregami Chogoro*. From the series *The 69 Stations of the Kisokaido*. 1853. Ref#: JPR-78816



(Right) *Otsu: Koman*. From the series *The 69 Stations of the Kisokaido*. 1852. Ref#: JPR-84971



(Left) Aigo Gozaemon Hisamitsu. From the series *Heroes of the Taihei Era*. c. 1848. Ref#: JP-89940

(Center) Hayashi Tanshiro Taketoshi. From the series *Heroes of the Taihei Era*. c. 1848. Ref#: JPR-87643

(Right) Tatenaka Kanbyoe Shigeharu. From the series *Heroes of the Taihei Era*. c. 1848. Ref#: JP2091



(Left) Horse: Shirafuji Hikosaburo Carrying the Horse. From the series *Heroes for the Twelve Zodiac Signs*. 1854. Ref#: JPR-84967

(Center) Shiba I (nickname: Chutatsu). From the series *Heroes from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. 1834. Ref#: JPR-87183

(Right) Descending Geese at Hokkyo: Fujiwara no Masakiyo. From the series *Eight Views of Military Brilliance*. 1852. Ref#: JPR-87292







(Left) *The Ghost at Nissaka*. From the series *Pairings for the 53 Stations of the Tokaido*. c. 1842. Ref#: JP2759



(Center) *Kuwana: Story of the Sailor Tokuzo*. From the series *Pairings for the 53 Stations of the Tokaido*. c. 1845. Ref#: JPR-87300



(Right) *Kusatsu: Dragon Lady and Tawara no Toto*. From the series *Pairings for the 53 Stations of the Tokaido*. c. 1845. Ref#: JPR-84868



(Left) *Onzosbi Ushiwaka-maru*. From the series *Famous and Heroic Leaders*. 1856. Ref#: JPr-46232



(Center) *Poet Fujiwara no Okikaze: Higuchi Jiro Kanemitsu on Pine Tree*. From the series *Ogura 100 Poems by 100 Poets*. c. 1845. Ref#: JPr-46223



(Right) *Tamakazura Chapter: Tamatori-bime*. From the series *Ukiyoe Parallels for the Tale of Genji*. c.1845. Ref#: JP5575



(Left) *Wanting for Beautiful Nape: Carp from Sunomata River in Totomi*. From the series *Treasures of Mountain and Seas*. 1852. Ref#: JP6237

(Center) *Yokoyama Taizo and Otaka Shuden*. c. 1845. Ref#: JP2085

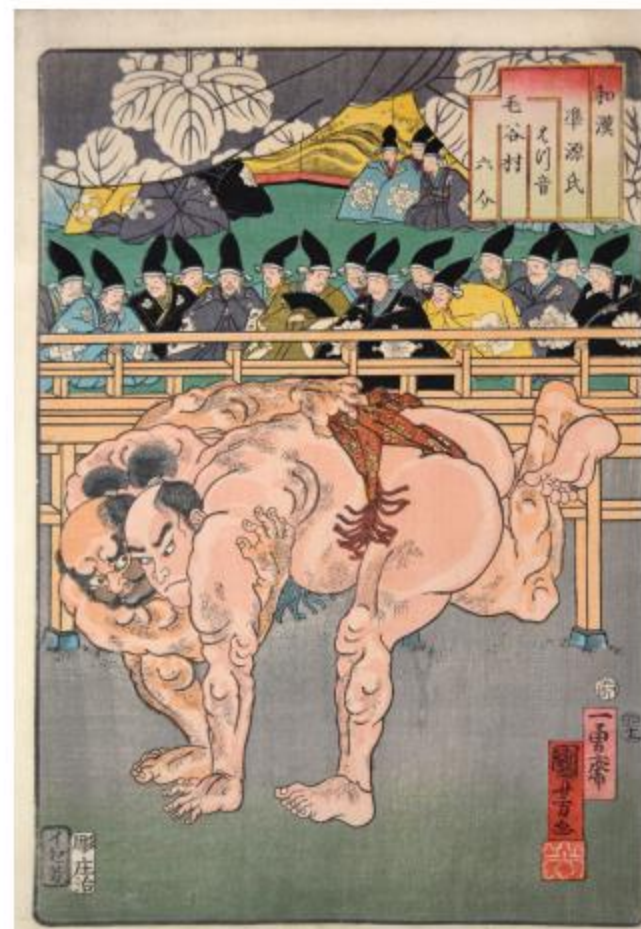
(Right) *Tazama Jutaro Mitsuoki*. From the series *Mirror of the Loyal Retainers One by One*. 1857. Ref#: JPr-46230



(Left) *Muramatsu Sandayu Takanao*. From the series *Portraits of the Faithful Loyal Retainers*. 1852. Ref#: JPR-87645

(Center) *Chapter XXIII, Hatsune: Rokusuke from Ketani Village*. From the series *Japanese and Chinese Comparisons for the Chapters of Genji*. 1855. Ref#: JPR-78824

(Right) *Baba Mino-no-kami Nobufusa*. From the series *Six Selected Heroes*. 1853. Ref#: JP5029







(Left) *Onchi Sakon Mitsukazu*. From the series *Six Selected Heroes*. 1853. Ref#: JP1510



(Center) *Artist Ukiyo Matabei*. 1853. Ref#: JP5420



(Right) *Strolling Ghosts and Cat Ghost*. c.1850. Ref#: JPR5277



(Left) *Yokkaichi*. From the series *Eight Views of Night Visits to Shrines*. c.1845. Ref#: JP1-17164



(Center) *Ghosts of Oiwa and Kobei*. c.1850. Ref#: JPR-87314



(Right) *Botaro's Nurse Otsuji*. From the series *Greatful Thanks for Answered Prayers*. c.1846. Ref#: JPR-87302



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